Editor's Note: This essay won the top prize in the Draper Essay Contest, sponsored by the Draper Armor Leadership Award Fund to mark the 75th anniversary of the program. Contestants were asked to write on the subject: "Leadership in the XXI Century — Digital Age." The second- and third-place entries will be published in future editions of ARMOR.

Between Decision and Action: Leadership at the Critical Moment

by Major Christopher D. Kolenda

Ten soldiers wisely led
Will beat a hundred without a head.

— Euripides

A great deal has been written about how leadership will change fundamentally in the twenty-first century as a result of digital technology. I disagree. To lead means to inspire others to follow willingly. Leaders do this by articulating a meaningful vision and a sound plan to get there, by being trustworthy in terms of character and competence, by instilling discipline and a winning attitude, and by making sound decisions. Such fundamentals have been discussed extensively, not just by modern theorists but by ancient soldiers and philosophers such as Xenophon, Plato, Caesar, Cicero, and myriad others.[1] Technology is merely a temporal condition. While specific leader competencies will change with technology, human nature does not. Leaders in the Digital Age will still have to inspire their soldiers with the same fundamentals as they did in the Bronze, Iron, Steel, and Industrial Ages.

A subject embedded in this discussion that bears serious consideration, however, is how digital-age technology will affect the role of the leader in combat. Will warfare in the twenty-first century be dominated by a "virtual" leader, a person who will become detached from the battle so he or she can process information and make decisions rapidly to keep pace with the tempo of information warfare? If the notion that combat is a contest of time-competitive decision-action cycles in which the side with the faster cycle will paralyze the slower side is accurate,[2] then the idea of a virtual leader — an information warrior — seems logical. Military history, in fact, is replete with examples of smaller, more agile forces shattering larger formations because of faster decision-action cycles.[3] According to the virtual leader argument, the side that can process information and make decisions the fastest will win.

The argument typically runs as follows. The advent of digital communications will speed the flow of information exponentially, enabling organizations to become flatter as the leader's span of control increases. Not only will leaders and staffs be able to receive, process, analyze, and produce data at a much more rapid pace, their ability to see the battlefield for themselves will see a similar dramatic increase. With digital technology, leaders will be able to "peer cybernetically" through the turret of a tank, the cockpit of an aircraft, or the sights of an infantryman. The result, according to one noted expert, will usher in the advent of the "electronic warfare wizard" as the leader of military organizations.[4] Armed with digital-age information technology, the twenty-first century leader will be able to make decisions on the battlefield detached from the chaos of combat. He or she will be a "virtual" leader, processing information and making decisions almost unfettered by friction. As the rapidity of decisions undergoes an order of magnitude increase, so will the speed of decision-action cycles in combat. Since the side with the faster decision-action cycle wins, warfare in the twenty-first century will be dominated by the virtual leader. The days of leaders having to be forward to see the battlefield for themselves will become a relic of previous millennia. In fact, the argument goes, leaders trapped in the old paradigm will not be able to keep pace with the tempo of the digital battlefield.

Furthermore, the enhanced capacity of digital command posts to assimilate subordinate units from many different organizations also enables the Army to break down existing organizational structures, create ad hoc, "plug and play," formations tailor-made for specific contingencies, and take them to war. Such capabilities mean that the old days of units having to spend a lot of time living and training together to achieve an acceptable level of performance and cohesion may be gone for good. Recent arguments in the *Army Times* about the "Strike Force" being the model of such an organization suggest that many senior leaders in the Army and Department of Defense take such notions seriously.[5]

These arguments assume that the movement from decision to action is continuous. When we dissect the nature of

battlefield paralysis in the decision-action framework, it becomes apparent that two periods of potential paralysis exist. The first instance occurs between information and decision. The second is the critical moment between decision and action; a connection that has fallen unexamined between military and leadership theory. This is the moment dominated by the human factor of fear in combat. A brief analysis of the importance of the critical moment illustrates the problem with the virtual leader argument. In fact, the increased lethality and tempo of the twenty-first century battlefield makes the physical presence of leaders and the necessity of developing cohesion, both in peace and in war, more rather than less crucial.

Combat Leadership: Dealing with Human Factors of War In the Critical Moment

The critical moment possesses the potential for battlefield paralysis, because the completion of the decision-action cycle requires soldiers to overcome fear and implement decisions. This is what Clausewitz meant when he said that "action in war is like movement in a resistant element."[6] Fear is one of the constants of war; fear of getting killed or maimed, fear of killing, fear of letting one's comrades down, fear of fear.[7] In battle, fear paralyzes soldiers. They tend to hide, take cover, bunch up, or simply remain in one spot. Paralysis remains until some minority of motivated, aggressive soldiers or leaders physically influences the action by taking the fight to the enemy. Such understanding of human behavior led commanders such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, Patton, and many others to wear distinctive dress in combat, and many armies to follow the example of the Romans and carry standards into battle. These easily recognizable leaders and symbols, by their physical presence, proved to be a source of strength to their formations. Oftentimes, however, even physical presence was not enough. Alexander's soldiers could not bring themselves to scale the walls of a Mallian fortress until Alexander led by example.[8] Caesar's legions would not debark from a ship on the shores of Britain in the face of the enemy until a standard bearer leapt into the surf.[9] Even in modern live-fire training exercises, soldiers will hesitate to fire the first round. Once a trusted fellow soldier or leader leads by example, however, most of the soldiers are able to overcome their fear.[10] The bottom line is that leaders overcome paralysis in the critical moment through personal example. Cybernetic presence simply will not have the needed effect. Thus, regardless of how many decisions a detached commander makes, he is powerless once the battle is joined. The outcome of the battle at that point will depend upon the actions of subordinate leaders and soldiers. The twenty-first century battlefield, with its increased lethality and dispersion, will see the effects of fear compounded, not diminished.

The effects of fear remain crucial even once the battle is over in the form of psychiatric casualties. Although some contemporary arguments suggest that unit cohesion will be less important in the digital age, examples from twentieth century conflicts should generate some needed caution. During the Second World War, the 85th and 91st Infantry Divisions, outfits that were thrown together quickly and had little time to develop any meaningful cohesion, had 22.7% and 34.0%, respectively, of their casualties due to combat stress after 44 days of action in Italy. The 82nd Airborne Division, by contrast, had only 5.7% of its casualties due to combat stress after 38 days at Normandy, while the 101st Airborne had 2.0% after 42 days in the Battle of the Bulge.[11] Such data suggests that a cybernetic approach to cohesion could have devastating effects on combat formations.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument that new information technology should not lead us to cast away time-honored and proven principles and concepts of leadership in favor of some form of virtual leadership is the 1940 campaign in France. Particularly instructive is the breakout at Sedan on the Meuse River that pitted Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps against the French 55th Infantry Division, commanded by General LaFontaine.[12] By 1940, the ability to communicate by wire and wireless radio down to company and platoon level was a breakthrough in communication technology similar to the one we are experiencing today. The Germans and the French took opposite approaches to leadership in this "age." Guderian's Corps used the new communications technology to speed the flow of information and decisions, but never lost sight of the importance of leaders being physically present at the decisive point.[13] It was not uncommon for a battalion commander to be with a lead platoon, as Hermann Balck was at the critical Meuse crossing, or for the corps commander to be near the lead regiment in a position where he could see the battle with his own eyes. The fact that Guderian took the opportunity during the "Phoney War" (September, 1939 to May, 1940) to build cohesion within his Corps added to the Germans' effectiveness.

The French, by contrast, believed that information technology fundamentally altered the role of the commander in combat. While to some extent a holdover from WWI, the French command and control system relied on the ability of the commander to "see" the battlefield from his command post via radio and telephone traffic, make decisions, and communicate them to his subordinates. The French commanders saw themselves as holding "the handle of a fan," with all communications emanating from the command post.[14] So confident were the French that this system would work that General LaFontaine placed his concrete command post nearly 10 miles behind the Meuse facing south (the Germans were coming from the north). Furthermore, the French commanders in the Meuse sector took the "plug and play" approach to manning in the 55th Division. Rather than maintaining unit integrity, the French commanders mixed companies among battalions and regiments. It was not uncommon for a battalion commander to have two of his four companies from a different battalion or regiment. Such shuffling even occurred at the individual levels.[15] The result was a force, although trained, that was led from the rear and completely lacking in cohesion and mutual confidence, pitted against a well-trained, cohesive, and confident force led from the front.

Individual French soldiers fought well and had a chance of stopping the XIX Panzer Corps at the Meuse (Guderian, in fact, regarded the victory as "almost a miracle"[16]), but the ability of the German commanders to not only make decisions but to implement them carried the day. General LaFontaine made plenty of decisions. Very few of them were carried out with any sense of purpose in the atomized French effort. The illusion of control evaporated into a reality of panic, hesitation, and fear that paralyzed the 55th Division.

Conclusion

The point that Guderian grasped so artfully was that technology is an ever-changing battlefield condition. The battlefield itself, he realized, and the soldiers

who fight in it, are permanent. Combat is a human endeavor. Personal, trusted leadership of confident and cohesive units creates the fabric of battlefield effectiveness. Effective combat leadership in the Digital Age will differ from effective leadership in the Bronze, Iron, Steel, and Industrial ages only in the form of specific competencies. Armies and leaders ignore this simple truth at great peril.

What will change, however, are the consequences of poor or "virtual" leadership. As lethality and the speed of information continue to increase, the margin for error in combat will continue to narrow and will carry with it harsher and more bloody penalties. As so many historical examples illustrate, it is not only the pace of decision-making that counts in battle — it is the pace of implementation. Information technology has the potential to speed decisions, and leaders must master this capability, but only trustworthy leaders in front of cohesive units can implement them in battle. It is the ability to execute in the critical moment between decision and action that will spell the difference between victory and defeat in the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1]For some classical references see Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* (Estate-Manager), in *Conversations of Socrates*, translated by Hugh Tredennick and Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* (Education of Cyrus), translated by Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1914); Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); Plato, *Statesman*, translated by Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1925); Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, translated by H.J. Edwards (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1997); Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica* (The Republic), translated by Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1988); Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis* (On Duties or On Moral Obligations), translated by Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1990). For modern discussions of leadership see Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (Garden City Park, New York: Avery Publishers, 1987); James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

[2]For the best discussion of the "time-competitive decision-action cycle," also known as the "Boyd Cycle," see William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 4-7.

[3]A few examples are the battles of Leuctra (371 B.C.), Cannae (216 B.C.), Gaugamela (331 B.C.), Austerlitz (1805), Sedan (1940), and Desert Storm (1991).

[4]Eliot A. Cohen, "A Revolution in Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1996), 48-50.

[5]See, for instance, Major General Daniel R. Zanini, "Commentary," *Army Times* (February 15, 1999).

[6]Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 120.

[7]Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation* (Ottawa, Canada: Department of National Defence, 1980), 309, cited in Charles F. Brower and Gregory Dardis, "Teaching Combat Leadership: Closing the Gap between Expectation and Experience," in Christopher D. Kolenda, *The Art of Leadership in War and Peace* (currently under review by Stackpole Press), 40.

[8]Flavius Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* (Campaigns of Alexander), translated by P.A. Brunt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1976), VI. viii. 3 (Citations of classical texts are by book, section, and paragraph number. Some works, such as Caesar's, do not contain section numbers.).

[9]Caesar, IV. 25.

[10]Kellett, 314.

[11]DA PAM 350-2, *Developing and Maintaining Unit Cohesion* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), cited in Robert W. Madden, "Living on the Edge: Building Cohesion and the Will to Win," in Kolenda, 60.

[12]For the best discussion of the breakout at Sedan and the differences in the command and control techniques employed by the French and Germans see Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1990).

[13]Ibid., 326-332.

[14]Ibid., 27-30, 326-332.

[15]Ibid., 114-120.

[16]Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 84.

Major Christopher D. Kolenda, a 1987 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, is the S-3 of 3/2 ACR, Fort Polk, La. He has been a tank and scout platoon leader, troop XO and motor officer, and troop commander of A Troop, 1-7 Cav, 1st Cav Division. He has taught history at West Point and has published earlier articles in *ARMOR*.